AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION BETWEEN

SENIOR AIR FORCE LEADERSHIP

AND TROOPS IN THE FIELD

by

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Preface

In writing, if it takes over 30 minutes to write the first two paragraphs, select another subject.

—Raymond Aron

The Air Force's day-to-day activity is, by nature, a human endeavor. People are the bedrock of our organization, and teamwork is a hallmark of the way we work. Together we attempt daily to accomplish great things for the benefit of others.

These accomplishments will reach their highest possible levels only if we continue to progress toward a truly seamless, focused, integrated, synergistic organization. This will be impossible without effective communication. Effective communication is the bridge that allows us to build shared vision. It is the lifeblood of daily operations. It is an activity to which senior leaders should devote considerable time and energy. Without an effective communication strategy, the greatest leaders' visions will never be shared or achieved.

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Abstract

The Air Force is a complex organization operating within a complex, unpredictable environment. As such it needs a shared organizational vision to maximize its effectiveness. Members must be aware of the direction senior leaders would have their organization go. They must also be aware of the issues these leaders consider most important. Unfortunately, this is not currently the state in the Air Force. Members are generally unaware of their leaders' vision and are similarly ignorant of key issues. This is not the fault of the members. These deficits stem from shortcomings in the Air Force's communication plan.

Communication plays a pivotal role in building shared vision. Good communication processes are necessary to reach all organizational members with important information. In the Air Force's case they are necessary to overcome challenges posed by the geographic dispersion of members, diverse organizational elements, significant part-time organizational membership, bureaucratic structures, and the operating environment.

This paper recommends rectifying the Air Force's communication shortcomings by including strategic direction from senior leaders in *Airman* magazine. This magazine should then be distributed directly to all members' homes, facilitating the effective dissemination of essential organizational information.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Build for your team a feeling of oneness, of dependence upon one another and of strength to be derived by unity.

—Vince Lombardi

Research Question

Given the unique nature of the Air Force and the complex environment within which it functions, creating the organization-wide shared vision necessary to build and maintain the Air Force as a highly effective team presents significant challenges. This paper explores the role communication plays in senior leaders' efforts to overcome these challenges and build such a team. Current literature suggests ways Air Force leadership can maximize the effectiveness of communication in facilitating organizational success.

Background and Significance of Problem

Teamwork and the Military Mission

The United States' Armed Forces exist to serve an extremely important purpose: "…to deter threats of organized violence against the United States and its interests, and to defeat such threats should deterrence fail."[1] The importance of this mission to the American people cannot be understated. In this time of reduced resources and increased operational commitments, the

Air Force must function efficiently in order to perform its part. Teamwork is a key aspect of maximizing this efficiency – one that has not gone unnoticed by Air Force leadership.

Air Force Team Building

The actions of Air Force leaders illustrate the importance they place on building teams: At the base level, wing commanders use explicit team-building terminology to describe those under their command – terms like Charleston AFB's "Team Charleston" and Travis AFB's "Travis Team." Efforts are not limited to the base level either – they are force-wide. Recently, the Aerospace Basic Course was established at Air University – it's mission: "To inspire new USAF officers to comprehend their roles as airmen; one who understands and lives by USAF core values, articulates and demonstrates USAF core competencies, and who dedicates oneself as a warrior in the world's most respected aerospace force."[2] This is a deliberate attempt to forge the Air Force officer corps into a single team, dedicated to a broad Air Force mission regardless of individual specialty.

Preview of Argument

Critical Role of Communication

Building and maintaining a high-performing team is a multifaceted effort. Essential to this effort is that team members "develop an understanding of the importance of what they are doing and a shared vision of where they are going."[3] This cannot be accomplished without communication, and much of the responsibility for communicating this vision falls on organizational leaders: "Those leading the organization…are responsible for its effectiveness, and they must take an active role in articulating a desired future state and energizing commitment to it."[4] Air Force leadership has made efforts to accomplish this.

Consider the preceding examples of efforts to build teams and teamwork within the Air Force. These efforts, and all others like them, have something in common: leaders communicating, directly or indirectly, an aspect of their shared vision. While these efforts are important, and there is significant potential benefit to the reinforcement gained by building a vision through multiple media and messengers, the fact remains that a vast majority of Air Force members are unable to articulate either the Air Force leadership's vision of the service's future or the issues which leadership considers most crucial to achieving this vision. This paper argues that this deficiency can be overcome by adding a critical element to the Air Force's efforts to build a force-wide team: *a single medium that consistently reaches out and communicates to a large portion of the Air Force a central message of vision, around which all reinforcement efforts are based – a medium that <u>delivers to all members a common vision from the top down</u>*.

Assumptions and Limitations of Study

Presupposition that Vision is Ineffectively Communicated

It is beyond the scope of this project to conduct a detailed, scientific analysis validating the underlying assumption that a vast proportion of Air Force members are unable to articulate the vision senior Air Force leaders have for the service's future or the issues they consider most crucial. It is the author's educated opinion that if such an analysis were conducted, the assumption would unquestionably be validated. This opinion is based on an unscientific survey of fellow service members and years of anecdotal experience in both headquarters- and field-level units.

Focus on Vision Transmission, Not Vision Development

This paper does not attempt to prove the generally accepted principle that a shared organizational vision can facilitate high-quality organizational performance. Instead, it focuses on communicating a vision once it has been developed. In so doing, it does not mean to discount the role which integrating organizational members into the vision development process plays in establishing that vision as "shared." In an organization the size of the Air Force, it would be impractical, if not impossible, to involve more than a small fraction of the organizational membership in developing and refining a force-wide vision. Thus, this paper assumes (1) that vision is developed through an effective process, complete with feedback mechanisms to evaluate the efficacy of the vision that is promulgated, and (2) that the vision will always need to be transmitted to the vast majority of Air Force members who were not intimately involved in vision development.

Definitions

Members	While this term is frequently used to refer to uniformed service personnel, within this document it collectively describes all individuals who are part of the Air Force organization – uniformed members, federal civilians, and political appointees.

Notes

1 *National Military Strategy of the United States of America*, 1997, 5.
2 Squadron Officer College, "Aerospace Basic Course – Mission," 2000, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 15 December 2000, available from http://www.au.af.mil/au/soc/abc/mission.htm.
3 Don Hellriegel, John W. Slocum, Jr., and Richard W. Woodman, *Organizational Behavior* (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Company, 1995), 691; J.R. Katzenbach and D.K. Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1993), 119-126.
4 Thomas G. Cummings and Christopher G. Worley, *Organization Development and Change* (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Company, 1993), 150.

Chapter 2

Organizational Characteristics

Senior Air Force leaders command an extremely large, complex organization. This chapter consolidates many of the divisive organizational characteristics senior leaders must face when attempting to communicate their desired shared vision. These characteristics include a geographically dispersed force, diverse organizational components and job specialties, members serving in a variety of statuses, and a hierarchical bureaucracy. These parts must come together to accomplish a single organizational mission.

Worldwide Locations

Air Force members' job locations span the United States and beyond. With major and minor facilities from coast to coast, in Alaska, Hawaii, two United States territories and 12 foreign countries, the breadth of locations where members serve is immense.[1]

Figure 1: Major Air Force Bases Located in the 50 States[2]

Figure 2: Major Air Force Facilities Located Overseas[3]

Diverse Contributing Elements

Sub-Organizations

The Air Force is organized in nine major commands and geographic forces, four direct reporting units, 38 field operating agencies, and its Air National Guard components.[4] These organizational divisions are based on function, geography, and status as an active or reserve component. For example, Air Combat Command maintains bombers, fighters, and attack aircraft for deployment and homeland air defense; Air Education and Training Command recruits, trains, and educates; the Air Force Operational Test and Evaluation Center determines capabilities and limitations of systems; and the Air Force Services Agency implements quality-of-life programs to enhance combat readiness.

These organizations' foci on their individual contributions to the overall Air Force mission breed organizational diversity. Every Air Force component's culture varies to some degree in areas such as professional language, valued behaviors, and the strength of its combat orientation. This variation contributes to the complexity of the leadership challenge faced by senior Air Force leaders.

Job specialties

Not only is the Air Force divided organizationally; it is also divided by the skills each of its members bring to their organizations. Specialties range from pilots to audiologists to cryptologic linguists to electricians. Just as each organizational division has its own culture, the cultures of each job specialty are also unique.

Active & Reserve Components

Few, if any, civilian CEOs lead a workforce composed largely of part time workers. This is not the case with United States military services, and the Air Force is no exception. As of September 30, 2000, the Air Force's reserve components had 243,425 personnel assigned, compared to the active components' 495,067.[5] Thus, the reserve components were equal in size to approximately 49% of the total active force and comprised approximately 33% of the total Air Force strength.

Political Appointees & Government Civilians

Not all Air Force members wear the uniform. The President appoints several civilians as senior officials, including the Secretary of the Air Force. Furthermore, many federal and state civilian employees serve alongside uniformed personnel in the active and reserve components. In fact, civilians account for 29% of the active force.
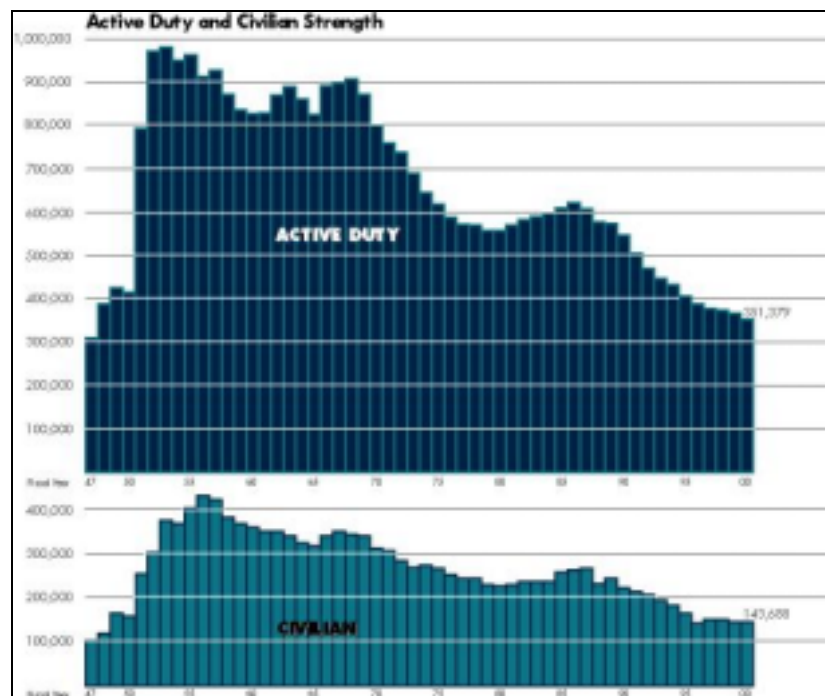

Figure 3: Active Duty and Civilian Strength[6]

Bureaucracy

The Air Force has a multi-layered bureaucratic organizational structure that places a large number of management layers between senior leaders and troops in the field. For example, between the Secretary of the Air Force and a notional airman there are typically nine intervening layers: the Chief of Staff, a major command commander, a numbered air force commander, a wing commander, a group commander, a squadron commander, an operations officer, a flight commander, and a superintendent.

Single, Overarching Mission

Air Force leaders view their complex, diverse organization as an "integrated aerospace force,"[7] the parts of which come together to form a greater whole. This force works to accomplish a single mission: "To defend the United States and protect its interests through aerospace power."[8]

Notes

[1] "Database," *Airman* 45, no. 1 (January 2001): 22-30.
[2] Ibid., 28, 29.
[3] Ibid., 30.
[4] "Organization," *Airman* 45, no. 1 (January 2001): 4-19.
[5] "Database," *Airman* 45, no. 1 (January 2001): 32, 34.
[6] Ibid., 32.
[7] *Global Vigilance, Reach, & Power: America's Air Force Vision 2020*, 2000, 4.
[8] Ibid, inside cover.

Chapter 3

Organizational Environment

Numerous factors combine to create a dynamic, uncertain environment within which the Air Force must function. While the following list is not exhaustive, these factors contribute significantly to this constant change and unpredictability: the pace of technological change, a constantly changing security environment, political influences, and relationships and interactions with other United States military departments and agencies.

Technological Change

There is no question that the pace of technological change in today's world is quite rapid. Market opportunities created by an increasingly global economy, the enabling effect of improved information and communications technologies, and the development of large research communities have combined to facilitate this fast-paced technological transformation.[1] Military technology has certainly been included in this revolution.

Evidence of the rapid transformation of military equipment is readily apparent in stealth technology, increasingly precise munitions, and GPS navigation. There is no indication that the pace of change will slow – if history is an example it will continue to increase. Major cycles of innovation now span half the time they did 150 years ago.[2] Air Force leaders must possess the ability to quickly position their organization for success in the face of these changes.

Constantly Changing Security Environment

Another significant factor contributing to the uncertain nature of the Air Force's future operational arena is the constantly changing security environment. The rise of non-traditional security threats, the growing number of independent states with which the United States must interact, and the changing goals of foreign governments all serve to constantly reshape the United States' security context.

Threats to our interests have evolved and will continue to do so. "While traditional security problems…remain central concerns, military planners must consider various ill-defined dangers. Individually and collectively…nontraditional security problems are shaping and defining security environments worldwide."[3] For example, terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction recently have become particular areas of concern. If the Air Force is to successfully meet these continually evolving threats, it must also continually evolve.

Another non-static variable is the world's number of independent nations. Since 1990, the United States has recognized 26 new countries.[4] With each of these countries has come yet another factor that the United States must consider when formulating its security policy. Currently the United States recognizes 191 independent states.[5] In addition to the complexity generated by this large and increasing number of states, leaders must also grapple with these nations' changing goals.

Nations that are allied do not always remain so; likewise, enemies may become friends. Nations' interests change. Such adjustments further complicate the environment leaders must consider when preparing for a range of possible futures. Moreover, leaders dealing with newly created states frequently cannot reference historical precedent when anticipating these states

goals and probable actions. This creates yet another level of uncertainty in the security environment.

Political Factors

Civilian Leadership

The fact that United States military forces fall under the command of elected and appointed civilian officials creates uncertainty for Air Force leaders. This uncertainly exists because the tenure of these officials is both unpredictable and finite. Leadership changes will definitely occur, but it is somewhat uncertain at what interval. Presidents generally serve for at least four years and sometimes serve for eight. The Secretary of Defense, as an appointed official, often changes during the course of a single presidential administration. These changeovers in the individuals exercising civilian control over United States military forces translate into unpredictable strategic direction for the Air Force. Different officials can have different perspectives on how best to assure the nation's security. With each change of personnel comes the possibility of a new strategic direction. If this direction changes, the Air Force can be required to transform its organizational characteristics.

Constitutional Separation of Powers

The Department of Defense falls within the executive branch of the United States government. By constitutional design its authority is balanced by the legislative and judicial branches. Of particular note to the Air Force in this power balance are the abilities of Congress, which is constitutionally empowered to raise military forces. One example of these abilities is the congressional purview to determine funding levels: The Air Force can only spend money consistent with Congressional authorization and appropriation. Congress, for the most part,

gives funds to the Air Force on an annual basis only. The resultant unpredictability of future funding makes long-term planning difficult and creates an uncertain environment for the Air Force.

Relationship With Other Services

The Air Force is just one part of the United States' military. The joint nature of modern warfare has created many systemic relationships between the Air Force and its sister services. "…Projection of power is inherently a joint undertaking, because of the inter-Service linkages of modern command, control and communications, the multi-Service structure of the defense transportation system, and the broad range of forces typically involved."[6]

The fact that the services influence each other in a systemic context makes the Air Force's operating environment even more uncertain. Each service is by no means a static entity – their weapon systems, force structure, and readiness for different types of combat are constantly in flux. As part of a joint team, the Air Force must be ready to adapt to such changes in the other team members.

Notes

[1] Andrei Sulzenko, "Challenges of Rapid Technological Change: Catching up with 'The Jetsons,'" *Canada – United States Law Journal* 25, 1999, 22; on-line, Internet, available from the EBSCOhost Academic Search Elite database.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Graham H. Turbiville, Jr., "The Changing Security Environment," *Military Review* 77, No. 3 (May/Jun 1997): 5-10.

[4] United States State Department, "The Changing World Map," 2001, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 9 February 2001, available from http://geography.state.gov/htmls/newschang.html.

[5] United States State Department, "Independent States in the World," 2001, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 9 February 2001, available from http://www.state.gov/www/regions/independent_states.html.

[6] Joint Pub 1, *Joint Warfare of the Armed Forces of the United States*, 10 January 1995, vi.

Chapter 4

Communication Challenges

Synergistic force-wide efforts can be facilitated, and the tools to deal with constant change can be provided, by building a shared organizational vision. The key word in this statement is "shared." The vision must reach members throughout an organization and engender behavior that supports the vision. Communication processes are obviously essential in facilitating these outcomes. Communication is not an end in and of itself – it is a conduit or medium through which behavior can be influenced.[1] Achieving such influence is not without challenges, many of which stem from the organization's characteristics and the environment in which it operates. Other challenges exist simply due to the general nature of communications.

Challenges Posed by Organizational Characteristics

The Air Force's geographically dispersed force, internal diversity, large reserve component, and bureaucratic structure each create communication challenges for senior leaders. The challenge posed by the large physical distances that separate many members is by no means the least of these. Leaders' vision must reach members around the globe. An effective centralized communication strategy can help to overcome this barrier. "In an environment that extols the virtues of decentralization to meet customers' needs quickly, many corporations consolidate their communications... The value of a central management structure for communication makes

sense for many organizations, particularly ones with global operations."[2] Such a structure can organize the effective employment of media to reach this widespread audience.

Another communication difficulty stems from the diverse organizational elements and job specialties within the Air Force. Since each element and specialty tends to have its own unique subculture, senior Air Force leaders must be able to communicate their message of a single overarching vision to a varied audience. This can be difficult. "In organizations, managers' and employees' past experiences and learning strongly influence their perceptions… Each person pays attention to a different aspect of the same general stimulus because of the individual's training and work experiences."[3] Thus, a single message may be interpreted differently by civil engineers, pharmacy technicians, fighter pilots, airlift pilots, and chapel assistants. Leaders must choose their media and message so as to minimize this potential distortion.

Reserve forces present yet another communication challenge for senior leaders. Unlike full-time members who are usually on duty, reserve forces may be on duty for as little as one weekend in a given month. Thus, a message that would reach a full-time member almost immediately may not reach a reservist until several weeks later when he or she reports for a drill weekend. Even then, the opportunity for communication is limited. Reservists must frequently accomplish a large amount of training in just two days. This can leave little, if any, time to receive messages sent by senior leaders.

The Air Force's bureaucratic structure creates another communication hurdle: serial distortion. As messages are relayed from corporate leadership to troops in the field, the messages may undergo significant changes as they pass through numerous organizational layers. These changes may be made intentionally, caused by subtle changes in each transmission, arise from assumptions made to fill gaps in message content, or result from sender or receiver inability

to reproduce an identical message due to cognitive, physical, or social limitations.[4] Any of these causal factors can lead to the same result: loss or distortion of information. In a study of 100 businesses, it was determined that 80% of information disseminated by top management was lost on its way to the lowest level workers.[5]

Challenges Posed by Organizational Environment

The organizational environment within which the Air Force operates also creates communication challenges for senior leaders. This environment of constant change necessitates that the organization constantly transform itself in order to maintain a proper fit within its systemic context. In the face of this process, the organization needs focus. No senior leader is capable of overseeing and orchestrating every minor aspect of such transformation. Instead, leaders must give broad guidance to troops in the field, allowing these troops the freedom of action to shape their portions of the organization to be consistent with this guidance. Transmitting such guidance once is often not enough.

The continuous nature of organizational transformation necessitates that senior leaders regularly provide updates to troops in the field regarding the direction leaders would have the troops go. In the absence of such updates, the organization may fail to evolve or may stray in an unwanted direction. If individuals perceive chaos, they attempt to anchor themselves to reduce uncertainty. These anchors are frequently generated by creating abstractions – convictions that certain "truths" are constant and unchanging. "When personal abstractions become too fixed, or when they effectively prevent useful perception of change, they can become a barrier to effective communication."[6] Regularly providing strategic direction can help to reduce the perception of chaos and therefore overcome this potential pitfall.

Other Communication Challenges

Three additional communication challenges are worthy of mention. They are (1) the tendency for individuals to lack strategic guidance if they are unmotivated to seek it, and organizational leaders do not fill this void by transmitting it to them, (2) the fact that individuals will construe meaning from a lack of leadership communication, and (3) the manner in which individuals deal with conflicting information and information overload.

The lack of motivation to seek strategic guidance is a significant problem. It need not stem from a general apathy for such information. Organizational members may instead simply not realize they are in need of this information. In either case, transmitting a vision to such individuals is a significant step toward overcoming this deficiency. Transmitting a vision also helps by preventing members from attributing meaning to a void in leadership communication.

If there is a lack of communication from leadership, individuals will tend to infer that this has a significant meaning. They will then create a meaning on their own, i.e., they will create their own reality.[7] This reality may be based on assumptions that leadership is deliberately holding back information or on other unwanted stimuli. In any case, a lack of downward communication can result in undesirable perspectives on the part of organizational members. Still, simply communicating is not enough. Communication must also be consistent and arrive in the proper quantity.

Inconsistent messages and overwhelming quantities of information can cause communication difficulties. In an organization of the Air Force's size, the number of potential message senders is quite large. If many of these senders reach out to the same audience, it is possible for organizational members to receive conflicting information. Members may also receive such large quantities of information that they become overloaded. Conflicting messages

and overwhelming information quantities may lead individuals to rely on a sampling of message content.[8]   If this sample lacks congruence with messages sent by senior leaders, unity of organizational effort may be compromised.

Notes

[1] Brian L. Hawkins, *Managerial Communication* (Santa Monica, CA: Goodyear Publishing Company, 1981), 24-25.

[2] Michael B. Goodman, *Corporate Communication for Executives* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 2-3.

[3] Don Hellriegel, John W. Slocum, Jr., and Richard W. Woodman, *Organizational Behavior* (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Company, 1995), 77.

[4] Cynthia Stohl and W. Charles Redding, "Messages and Message Exchange Processes," in *Handbook of Organizational Communication*, ed. Fredric M. Jablin (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987), 479.

[5] Hawkins, 202.

[6] Ibid., 53-54.

[7] Ibid., 51.

[8] Stohl and Redding, 475-77.

Chapter 5

Specific Recommendations to USAF Leadership

"Corporations that do not value communication highly are doomed to whither."[1]

The following recommendations are intended to promote the establishment of shared vision in Air Force members. They propose to do so by transmitting a vision, reinforcing material, and key current issues in a manner that overcomes the communication challenges presented in Chapter 4.

Communicate Vision through *Airman* Magazine

Senior Air Force leaders should undertake an effort to change the focus of *Airman* magazine from informing to guiding. In its current form *Airman* is an outstanding publication with exceptional potential. It is professionally printed, visually attractive, and well written. As such, it presents an excellent basis for developing a medium to bring senior leadership's vision to all members. This can be accomplished through the implementation of several content and distribution changes:

Currently the centerpieces of *Airman* are articles that tell the Air Force story – articles written to inform about aspects of the Air Force mission and how it gets done. This content should be enhanced to include a one-page article in every issue from the Secretary of the Air Force, Air Force Chief of Staff, and Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force. Other senior

leaders (e.g., the Secretary of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Commanders of the Unified Commands, other service chiefs, etc.) should also be afforded the opportunity to write occasional articles to enhance the magazine's breadth. While it is important for such senior leaders to commend troops on the job they do, this should not be the focus of these articles. These articles must focus on developing shared vision and encouraging behavior that supports this vision. Their content should engage members to find ways of addressing and supporting the favorable resolution of the Air Force's most important issues.

This enhanced magazine should then be distributed directly to each Air Force member via direct mail to the member's home. This should be done for all members: active duty military, civilian, and reserve. If possible, the exceptional contributions of the retired military community should also be recognized by distributing *Airman* directly to all Air Force retirees. These individuals, who still serve, albeit at a reduced level, can have a profound effect on recruiting and the legislative process.

There is no doubt that distributing *Airman* in this manner would result in increased costs to the Air Force. To offset a portion of these costs, the magazine should no longer be provided to Air Force units free of charge. Furthermore, magazine publication should be reduced to once per quarter. This will limit costs, allow senior leaders to contact each member directly four times per year, and allowing sufficient time between each issue to ensure the upcoming publication focuses on appropriate strategic issues.

Solution Characteristics that Meet Communication Challenges

Changing the content of *Airman* and distributing it as previously described would achieve the valuable strategic purpose of facilitating shared vision development. It would also address many of the identified communication challenges faced by Air Force leaders.

First, by mailing *Airman* directly to each member, senior leaders could overcome the problem of regularly communicating with a geographically dispersed force. Each magazine would reach every member four times per year, no matter where they were stationed. Visiting all members directly this often would be virtually impossible. This method of distribution would also reach every reserve component member independent of his or her presence at a drill period.

Second, by transmitting a vision message to each organizational member in parallel, the message distortion associated with serial transmission can be avoided.

Third, as a written communication, its content can be carefully composed and tested. Before publication, proposed message content can be interpreted by representative members of various sub-organizations and job specialties. Based on their feedback, potential variations in message interpretation can be minimized. The fact that the communication is written has the added benefit of longevity. Unlike verbal communication, it can be referenced multiple times, allowing leaders at intermediate levels of the bureaucratic structure to use it as a resource for building reinforcing tools containing consistent messages.

Fourth, it is distributed regularly and predictably. Regular publication allows leaders to ensure members always have a current perspective on senior leadership's vision and key issues. Predictable publication allows members to become accustomed to receiving these updates and conditions them to look for them. Together, these characteristics will help to frame members' organizational realities, reducing perceived chaos and dependence on fixed abstractions. This will leave the organization more open to senior leaders' messages and better able to adapt to their desired vision.

Fifth, as an official publication with content from senior leaders, it will convey a measure of authority. As members become accustomed to turning to *Airman* as their authoritative

information source, they will be better positioned to assess the legitimacy of conflicting information they receive through other channels. Members will therefore base their organizational reality more upon the vision of senior leaders than on information from other sources.

Sixth, this method of distribution does not rely on member motivation to seek out information. Members must only be motivated to read the publication when it arrives – not to seek it out in the first place. This stands in stark contrast to media such as the recently developed Air Force Issues web page (http://www.issues.af.mil). While this resource provides a good deal of useful information, members must make a conscious effort to seek it out. Bypassing the need to generate individual interest in searching for a vision or current issues greatly increases the possibility that such messages will get through.

Finally, distributing the magazine to all members provides a very inclusive message that has great potential for fostering team building. Sending the magazine to members' homes also increases the potential that leaders' messages will reach family members. The professional appearance and content of the magazine may also enhance service satisfaction, with possible positive influences on morale and retention.

Possible Critiques

Every idea has potential drawbacks, and this proposal is no exception. Its main vulnerabilities lie in the areas of increased cost and fears of a low potential for widespread readership.

There is no doubt that distributing *Airman* to each member's home four times per year would be more expensive than the publication's current limited distribution. Based on a pro-ration of the current advertised subscription cost of $23 per year, annual distribution cost under

this proposal (all active duty military, civilians, and reservists) would be approximately $5.5 million. Distributing the magazine to retirees would add significant additional costs. This figure would be offset by the elimination of current distribution expenses. Also, this cost does not consider potential efficiencies derived from economies of scale.

It is important to note that this increased cost must be weighed against the potential increased return that it delivers. *Airman* is currently found mainly in libraries, hospital waiting rooms, and unit break rooms. If members fail to spend significant time in these locations, the magazine's content goes unnoticed. Distributing directly to members' homes will ensure that valuable messages from senior leaders end up where they should – with their intended recipients. Furthermore, when compared to other media options, print is still considered to be low in cost.[2]

While it is low in relative cost, print media is also considered by some to be low in impact.[3] This may give root to fears that money spent to distribute *Airman* may be wasted. In this case those fears are unwarranted and are easily allayed. Part of the solution lies in providing interesting content and encouraging appropriate motivation to read the publication. First, a balance between professional and lighter content should be maintained. Maintaining an appropriate mix of issue articles, human-interest stories, and humor such as the current "Here's Jake" feature will ensure members continue to perceive *Airman* as a magazine rather than a professional journal. As such it should enjoy widespread readership. Also, leaders should be urged to use motivational techniques to encourage their subordinates to read *Airman*. For example, commanders could use the magazine as a springboard for discussion topics at staff meetings. This would encourage staff members to be familiar with the magazine's content. Another opportunity would be to make the magazine's content a source of question material for

quarterly award boards. Using these recommendations, *Airman* can be made a significant asset, just like the magazines published by other major organizations.

Numerous organizations view magazines as significant contributors to their organizational success. USAA, a Fortune 500 company with assets in excess of $60 billion, values the impact of a magazine enough to regularly distribute *USAA Magazine* to its entire membership, which is composed largely of military members. One of the major benefits touted by the Air Force Association in encouraging membership is a subscription to *Air Force Magazine*. (In fact, this publication's annual centerpiece issue contains the "USAF Almanac," a comprehensive picture of the Air Force which is similar to that provided in *Airman*'s annual "The Book.") Also, a large number of Air Force members demonstrate their desire to receive regular printed information about their organization by subscribing to the *Air Force Times*.

Notes

[1] Michael B. Goodman, *Corporate Communication for Executives* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 8.
[2] Ibid., 16.
[3] Ibid.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The Air Force is a complex organization: Its members are located throughout the world; it is composed of numerous diverse parts, each having its own culture; it includes numerous part-time personnel; and it is a large bureaucracy. It must also operate within a context that is made volatile and unpredictable by rapid technological change, a rapidly evolving security environment, political factors, and relationships with other military services. Despite these complexities and uncertainties, the Air Force must come together to accomplish a single, overarching mission.

Shared vision is the key to achieving this unity of effort. This vision cannot be built without good communication processes. One critical element of these processes is the direct transmission to troops in the field of an undistorted statement of vision, accompanied by appropriate reinforcing material. *Airman* magazine provides an exceptional medium for accomplishing this.

Airman is already an outstanding publication. By adjusting its content to include guidance from senior leaders and distributing the updated publication directly to members' homes, *Airman*'s utility can be further increased. Making such a change would address many barriers to effective communication posed by the Air Force's organizational structure and environment. It would also fill a void that exists in the effective communication of strategic direction from senior

leaders to the force as a whole. Such an effort would have great potential for increasing the Air

Force's unity and mission effectiveness.

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